

My mother was always a very active person. She was much more than a housewife; she constantly worked on craft and art projects. She was in a china painting club and a local woman's club. She volunteered regularly at our schools to bring our classes something fun to do, and she was active with my sisters' Girl Scout troop. She made things out of recyclable material before it was "in", such as making greeting cards out of pressed leaves. She dried flowers to make arrangements for people, and made scrumptious bread every Christmas to distribute to people she knew. She spent hours organizing our pictures into photo albums, teaching her Bible class, typing her notes for her class and stories of her life. Her great sense of order was based on the Bible and the Amy Vanderbilt book of etiquette. She tried to get me to follow that order as well. She had much more luck with the former than she did the latter.

She was a great woman, but in her sixties she began to lose her memory and her skills. Even with her mental deterioration, she still was very loving to family. This was especially true when she first learned that she had Alzheimer's, for she wanted to make the most of all of her relationships as long as she could. But even with her reduced capacity, she still had the drive to organize things – it was a basic component of her character.

As the disease began to take its toll, she would sit for long periods of time and sort through things, filing and re-filing the same things over and over. It seemed to be meaningful for her, but when we would later look at the results, we could not make any sense of the organization.

After we had moved her to an assisted living place, we were able to examine the house. Now we had to sort through her boxes of things – most of it was trash such as collections of cups from fast food places, Styrofoam take-out containers, glass jars, milk cartons, and tuna-fish cans. Occasionally we found things of interest that we wanted to keep; these were distributed among us kids. There was still some stuff that we could not bear to throw away, and so it ended up getting pushed to the back of the closets in the old home place.

When I look into my future, I realize that I may be on a similar path. I have been a sorter and organizer most of my life. Before the computer age, I used to type quotes out on paper and cut them into strips so that I could tape onto index cards. I also keep all kinds of things that most people throw away, just in case I might need them (and sometimes I do!). There is a great comfort in putting things into order, and I wonder at what point in my lifetime this would diminish, if ever.

In my life's work, I have accomplished a lot of things, but sometimes I wonder if it really amounts to much. I see a parallel in trying to understand my mother's scheme of organization. Perhaps there really is a master plan to this organization, but I'm just too dumb to see it. It reminds me of some management plans I have seen.

We are all in a continual search for a pattern that makes sense to us. As a scientist I work to try to figure out the universe, but I'm just not doing it very well.

I imagine that God sees our efforts at "organization" with amusement. He would be "puzzled" in a sense, for He would not be able to understand something we did that had no real meaning. This reminds me of the old Yiddish proverb, "Man plans, God laughs."

I think of things that I have created, whether words or music, and realize that though a particular thing may be a unique sequence of things, it might not have any real meaning. My music, for instance, may be a one-of-a-kind pattern of notes, but is it actually worth listening to? Is the meaning I try to make of my life any different from the organization that my mother was working on? Am I making any more progress than she did in her later years?

I don't think that anything we do compares in meaning at any level to God's Truth. I'm just glad that it doesn't need to. The Preacher claimed¹ that when he surveyed all that his hands had done and what he had toiled to achieve, that it was all meaningless, a chasing after the wind. I think that he was comparing his work to that of God's. The Preacher concludes² that we must just do the right thing as our duty, and that God will reveal the meaning of everything in the end – even what we do in our lives. Perhaps He will explain to me my mother's scheme as well.

1. Ecclesiastes 2:11, "Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun."

2. Ecclesiastes 12:13-14, "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil."

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